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AUDIO-LINGUAL METHODS IN THE LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAM.

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WHEN CHILDREN ENTER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, THEY POSSESS A LANGUAGE SYSTEM WHICH HAS BEEN INTUITED FROM WHAT THEY HEAR AND WHICH CAN PRODUCE FOR THEM AN INFINITE NUMBER OF SENTENCES REFLECTING EITHER STANDARD OR NONSTANDARD DIALECTS OF ENGLISH. THE ELEMENTARY TEACHER CAN EQUIP THOSE WHO SPEAK A DIVERGENT ENGLISH DIALECT WITH ANOTHER, MORE SOCIALLY PRESTIGIOUS ONE BY EXPOSING THE CHILDREN TO THE STANDARD DIALECT IN MEANINGFUL SITUATIONS, THUS BUILDING ON THEIR ABILITY TO ABSORB LANGUAGE AURALLY. TO ENABLE CHILDREN TO HEAR AND PRACTICE STANDARD ENGLISH, THE TEACHER SHOULD (1) BELIEVE SINCERELY THAT CHILDREN DO NOT SPEAK INCORRECTLY, BUT ONLY DIFFERENTLY, (2) DISCUSS LANGUAGE USAGE WITH THEM HONESTLY, MOTIVATING THEM TO ACQUIRE A "SECOND" OR "SCHOOL" LANGUAGE AS A NEW SKILL TO BE USED IN APPROPRIATE SITUATIONS, (3) TALK WITH THEM CONSTANTLY, READ GOOD STORIES TO THEM, AND URGE THEM TO MEMORIZE POETRY, DIALOGS, AND PLAYLETS DEVELOPED EITHER BY THE TEACHER OR THE CLASS FOR THE CHILDREN'S PARTICULAR AGE AND CULTURAL LEVEL, (4) PROVIDE THE CHILDREN WITH A VARIETY OF OPPORTUNITIES TO TALK FREELY ABOUT SUBJECTS INTERESTING TO THEM, (5) ENCOURAGE THEM TO TELL STORIES, DESCRIBE PROCESSES, AND PLAY GAMES EMPLOYING SUCH EXERCISES AS PATTERN PRACTICE DRILLS, AND (6) USE EXTENSIVELY SUCH TEACHING AIDS AS THE "LANGUAGE MASTER," TAPE RECORDERS, AND PHONOGRAPH RECORDS. (THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE 1967 NCTE ANNUAL CONVENTION.) (JB)

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AUDIO-LINGUAL METHODS IN THE LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAM

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Any discussion of teaching approaches, methods or techniques presupposes a model or theory of language acquisition. Unfortunately, we do not know how people learn to speak their languages. The best we can do is to make some good guesses. Some of the best guesses have come from current linguistic theory.

This theory tells us that each child is his own grammarian. By this is meant that the child builds a grammar--something which may be thought of as a speech producing mechanism--in his head. This grammar has been distilled from the language he has heard and, later on, when he learns to read, from what he reads. The former is probably more important than the latter.

The child's ears are bombarded daily with bits and pieces of language. These sentences and less than sentence utterances are a random sample, and for the most part are unique. (Most of the sentences you hear me say today are novel. You have never heard these exact sentences before, nor have I said them before.) Somehow from this hodge-podge of talk he hears, the child figures out the system. Certainly there must be something waiting in the human brain to be stimulated upon hearing speech. Animals cannot perform this magic feat. Only man is capable of it (although this is not to deny that animals have communication systems; they nevertheless don't have language.) This grammar which the child builds in his head in turn, then, enables him to produce an infinite number of sentences, most of which are unique.

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Except for a few set phrases such as greetings, leavetakings, polite formulae, etc., memory alone cannot account for language learning--although certainly it plays a part. Language is a far too complex thing to be committed to memory in its totality. Analogy undoubtedly plays a role, as is evidenced when the child says "I have two foots," or "I saw the mans running down the street." Somehow the child has learned which words are nouns and how they behave without ever hearing them labelled as such. In other words, he has learned to use his language, although he is not able to talk about it very well before his first study of formal grammar.

The grammar the child builds and internalizes is a function of the sample of language he hears. If he hears sentences of the type "I ain't got none" and if sentences of this same type get maximum cooperation among his peers, he will develop a grammar which produces this type of utterance. The child hears his language sample always in context, always in meaningful situations. His pronunciation, his syntax, his vocabulary are all the result of the language he hears spoken around him. Yet he may be hearing several different dialects of the language he is in the process of learning. Which one will he elect to mimic? Which will be his model? It seems clear that it is the language of his peers that he prefers. The young talker mimics his buddies; not Mom and Dad, although there are certainly parental influences.

Having acquired a large chunk of his language--most of its phonology, a large share of its syntax, and a vocabulary of varying size and scope--our language producing machine, in the form of a child, toddles off to school. What happens then?

If the child speaks a dialect similar to that of his teacher, he is home free. If, however, his dialect differs appreciably from that of his teacher, he is probably in dutch linguistically. Because such large numbers of our elementary teachers have had such inadequate training with respect to what language in general is -- and English in particular --, how language is learned, what dialects are, how language changes over time, they are generally ill-prepared to do anything with a child who speaks a divergent dialect except frighten, confuse, and eventually turn him off.

There is no question that speaking a socially acceptable dialect of a language is a useful thing. It is one gateway to upward movement within the structure of our society. With this in mind, well-meaning teachers begin to put the pressure on kids to talk good like status seekers should. The attitude all too commonly prevailing is that these children speak incorrect English. This is, of course, utter nonsense. The kids speak another dialect of the language, period. Now if it is deemed advisable, and I think it is, to afford children the opportunity to tack on another dialect--a prestige one--to the one they already speak, then the teacher is facing the problem in a way far more conducive to possible success than the tired old idea of stamping out bad English.

So this is our problem. We have children who speak dialects of English sufficiently different from those of higher prestige value so that they call attention to themselves. We want to help children learn another dialect--not another language; the language is still English. And, just as important, we want to equip the child with the ability to switch dialects so that he uses the appropriate dialect at the appropriate time.

How do we do this? Well, let me start off by suggesting what <u>not</u> to do, and I have already hinted at this. Step one, as I see it, is for the

teacher to get it firmly in mind that there is nothing inherently wrong with the way the child speaks. The child speaks differently. The teacher must believe this sincerely. With the background that most of us have, this is not a particularly easy thing to do. We must learn not to condemn what the child says. Now let me suggest more positive ways to help the chid acquire a second dialect.

Children are flexible and they are good mimics. This flexibility and mimicry are pretty much lost as they approach the teens, so I am suggesting capitalizing on them early. Let us strike while the linguistic iron is hot. In the beginning stages language is learned through the ear. I cannot urge too strongly that we really begin to bend kids' ears. By this I mean flood them with standard language. In my opinion, an elementary school teacher working with children who speak a divergent dialect should be a real blabbermouth yet at the same time a good listener. I think the teacher should spend a lot of time talking to the children about all manner of things. Also, I would suggest lots of stories being read to the children. It should be kept in mind that for many kids the only standard dialect of English they hear during a day is in school.

If children come from circumstances where they are not given many opportunities to talk, then the school simply must provide these opportunities. The essential thing to do is turn them on, talk-wise. The teacher, in the beginning stages, should be absolutely unconcerned about the dialect used. The primary objective is to get the kids talking. Once the children feel free to talk about subjects of interest to themselves, the time has come to provide them with opportunities to gain facility in the use of a standard dialect. I think one approach would be to talk quite honestly with the children about language. I would tell them that

many people have two "languages" which they use. One is the "everyday" language, the other is "school" or "social" or "business" language. I would then ask the children if they would like help in learning this new kind of speech. If presented properly, I'm sure the children will buy the idea of learning a new skill.

In addition to reading to the children, other techniques are available. One of these, of course, is the use of poetry. If carefully chosen, poems represent samples of standard English which the child can practice. While we have said earlier that memory cannot account for the way in which language is learned, nevertheless, it does play a part. In the beginning stages, poems should be selected that are within the child's cultural relevance (although by this I do not mean to dismiss fantasy), and which use normal word order.

Playlets are another means of putting standard English words into children's mouths. For the most part these are going to have to be written by teachers. They need not be great works of art. If possible, problem areas should be worked into the lines the children are to memorize and speak. In other words, the material to be learned is loaded. One caution, though, and that is the children should be speaking language that is natural for them; not adult language. Better yet, let the children make up their own plays. In a sense this is the "experience chart" approach. Immediately a problem comes to mind: the sentences given by the speaker of a non-standard dialect are going to diverge from what you as the teacher want him to practice. I would suggest accepting what the child says; then I would tell him that this is his "everyday" language and that you are now going to change it into "school" language. Point out where you are making the change. There is nothing to hide.

"Mixed" classes, that is, classes with students who speak one of the standard dialects of English along with those who speak divergent dialects, can make use of those students who speak standard dialects. (However, peer pressure can conceivably cause standard dialect speakers to switch rather than fight!). If during the playlets, the teacher pairs off a non-standard speaker and a standard speaker then the non-standard speaker is being given the opportunity to hear and practice along with a standard English speaker. This is one more opportunity for him to tune in to standard speech.

Pattern practice type exercises have been used with some success in second language teaching classes for a long time. Certain of them lend themselves to a type of game playing. One of these is of the substitution type. The theory behind this type of exercise is that the child's attention is drawn away from the pattern he is practicing and focused on the words he is called upon to substitute. Suppose the desired pattern is something like, "I am going home now." The teacher then gives cue words such as "to school." The child responds with "I'm going to school now." The teacher cues: "Mary;" the students reply, "Mary's going to school now." This is a type of chain drill. There is a little more variety and fun to this type of drill than a straight pattern practice exercise which amounts to saying sentences in a list.

Questions and answers can be used where the desired pattern is built into the answer. The teacher must be careful to structure the questions and answer so that they are natural. Exercises of the type:

Question: <u>Are you going to the store</u>?

Answer: <u>Yes, I am going to the store</u>.

should be avoided. The question part is satisfactory, but the answer is

bookish, and unreal. If one desires the pattern, "I am going to the store." then the following might be tried: What are you going to do after you finish your homework? I'm going to the store. This type of questioning yields a plausible answer; one that occurs in the real world.

The enterprising teacher can also use games for language practice. Care should be exercised to select those games that do indeed give the children the chance to say something. Certainly there is nothing wrong with games for games' sake, but we must keep in mind we are trying to give children a chance to use and practice language.

One clever teacher I observed deliberately used to short change children when giving them things to hand out. This forced the children to come to her desk and ask for more. If the question was not in standard English, she would quietly give the appropriate pattern, and have the child repeat it after her. This placed the language practice within a meaningful context and was not drill on sentences in isolation.

While playlets probably approach a real life situation more closely, dialogs certainly can be used for language practice. Dialogs should be short, easily committed to memory, natural, and for the most part, within the child's experience. There is not enough evidence as to the effectiveness of dialogs with speakers of non-standard dialects to be able to say exactly at what levels they are effective. Certainly they are worth a try.

Tape recordings and phonograph records can also be used to advantage. For children not yet able to read, simple books can be recorded for the children to listen to. Probably it would be advantageous for the children to "play at reading" while listening. This certainly won't do any harm when the children are ready for reading instruction. In fact, this will

probably help those children who were never read to by parents or older siblings.

For practice with short utterances, the Language Master is a useful device. For those of you not familiar with this machine, it is a modified tape recorder which takes cards upon which a strip of magnetic tape has been pasted. There is a space on the card for a sentence to be written, or a picture afixed, if desired. The child can see the printed form at the same time that he hears the utterance being spoken. It is simple to operate and any child can learn to work it within a few minutes.

May I interject a plea here that <u>all</u> language, whether live or recorded be natural. I would by all means avoid using school teacherese. (Why <u>do</u> teachers persist on saying, "Mrs. Brown wants all the children to sit down now, please." instead of "I want all the children to sit down now, please"?) After all, what we are trying to do is provide children with a model of standard English. Anything less than this is just a little bit phoney, and I personally think that children can spot this.

Still one more activity which might prove fruitful is for children to perform some action and describe what they are doing. The ability to do this is partially tied to maturation so for very young children too much should not be expected. For example, a child might be asked to thread a needle and describe what he is doing as he performs the action. This would seem to be a one-to-one activity with the teacher, but small groups could certainly participate. They participate by listening. As the child speaks, the teacher listens carefully. If errors occur--either linguistic or factual--the teacher supplies an appropriate model for the student (and the group as well) to imitate. The ultimate object of this game-like activity is for the child to work through a problem and be able to describe

in standard English what he has done. The task should be so structured that the child is absorbed in what he is doing, i.e., it should be challenging, with little focus on language per se. This situation will assist the teacher to give help without seeming to harp on language usage. Teachers, after all, should be providing models of language for listening and--hopefully--absorption; they should refrain from preaching about language usage.

In addition to manipulative tasks, pictures or better yet, series of pictures can be used to elicit a story from the children. Again, the teacher must be alert to language errors and provide a model of correct usage without seeming to be prescriptive. This is not an easy thing to do.

In summary, then, the so-called audio-lingual methods boil down to nothing more than giving children a chance to hear and practice a standard dialect of English in meaningful situations. Most analytical talk about language, for example, grammar explanations, are a sheer waste of time. *The children don't need this anymore* than you needed it when you were in school. What they do need is the chance to practice. Any trick, device, technique or gimmick short of torture, is probably a good one.